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# Keeping America Fed and Healthy During World War II: Sylvia Brooklyn Denhoff, Home Economist

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## KEEPING AMERICA FED AND HEALTHY DURING WORLD WAR II

### SYLVIA BROOKLYN DENHOFF: HOME ECONOMIST



Madeleine Lux and Amanda Zagame

HIS 462: Honors U.S. Women and World War II

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World War II served as a major force for change in the lives of many American women. Whether on the home front or overseas, the wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of the United States played an integral role in the American quest for victory. One such woman was Sylvia Brooklyn Denhoff. With a strong education in home economics and experience as a presenter and writer, she was hired by the left-wing newspaper *PM* to write “food columns” during the Second World War. While she does not define herself by her actions during the war, her role was essential in maintaining the morale on the American home front during the trying days of rationing and food shortages. Her story is truly remarkable and one that is best told “in her own words.”

Six months before the end of World War I, Sylvia Brooklyn was born to Alexander and Alice Zacharevitz Brooklyn, Eastern European Jewish immigrants from Russia, on May 6, 1918 in Passaic, New Jersey. She had two older sisters and one younger brother and admits to being “the middle child with middle child syndrome.”<sup>1</sup> Her father sold cars and automobile parts and was “*the* tire dealer for all of northern New Jersey.”<sup>2</sup> With the shift from a wartime to a peacetime economy as the World War I veterans returned home, the 1920s was a period of economic boom.<sup>3</sup> Alexander’s business soared as “the automobile, movie, radio and chemical industries skyrocketed during the 1920s.”<sup>4</sup> With 1.9 million registered vehicles on the road by 1929, cars were no longer “a rare luxury.”<sup>5</sup> Sylvia recalls, “When I was a child, people had money.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn Denhoff, interview by authors, Providence, RI, March 13, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Spiritus Temporis Web Ring Community, “Economy of the 1920s,” *Roaring Twenties*, <http://www.spiritus-temporis.com/roaring-twenties/economy-of-the-1920s.html> (accessed April 12, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

As a member of the middle class, for young Sylvia, “things were nice, we went to camp and we had everything we wanted - bicycles, nice home. Then the Depression came and everyone was affected by the Depression ... But, we always managed to have food on the table.”<sup>7</sup> The automobile industry was particularly hard-hit, with car sales dropping drastically during the Depression years, falling by almost 75 percent from 1929 to 1932 alone.<sup>8</sup> Sylvia’s father was able to keep his business, but sales “went way down”; and, unfortunately, although they increased after the war, his sales never went back to the level of the 1920s.<sup>9</sup> Sylvia and her siblings would try to save money wherever they could and would choose to walk several miles rather than spend five cents on the bus. This period of economic struggle taught Sylvia resourcefulness that helped her in her future work.

Sylvia attended Syracuse University from 1936 to 1940. She chose Syracuse because she was looking for a school with a home economics program. As a child, her mother would allow her to help with cooking and baking, activities she loved even from a young age.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Sylvia’s more serious interest in home economics began in middle school. She, like most American schoolgirls of the time, had to take cooking and sewing in seventh grade, subjects she enjoyed because she really liked her teacher. Although she first applied to Cornell University and was accepted, that school’s program was already full and, thus, she was asked to defer her enrollment until the following year. Not wanting to wait to begin school, she applied to Syracuse and was accepted. Sylvia enjoyed Syracuse and was active in campus life. She was a member of the Phi Sigma Sigma Sorority, a contributor to the school’s newspaper, *The Daily Orange*, and a member of the Home Economics Club.

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<sup>7</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Laramie Wyoming, “The Great Depression,” *A Brief History of the Auto Industry*, <http://laramie.willshireltd.com/TheGreatDepression.html> (accessed April 12, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



Originally majoring in Hospital Dietetics, Sylvia was thrilled when, during her sophomore year, Syracuse introduced a new program in Home Economics in Business. Sylvia switched into this new program, which would serve her well in the future. She explains, “We learned how to give demonstrations, how to write magazine articles, how to create recipes, and I was much more interested in that.”<sup>11</sup>

When Sylvia attended Syracuse, it was a much smaller school than it is now. She attended Syracuse’s College of Home Economics, an expansion of the School of Home Economics founded in 1918. The transition from the school to the college was overseen by Dean Florence Knapp in 1921. When Knapp retired in 1928, Anne Louise MacLeod became dean and served until 1948. Under MacLeod’s leadership, the college vastly expanded. Enrollment went from 200 in 1928 to almost 500 in 1948, and the faculty expanded from six members to thirty.

Sylvia attended the College when its population was comprised exclusively of women. The College has since undergone many changes. Enrollment began to decrease after MacLeod’s retirement in 1948. Then, in 1971, the school became the College of Human Development and expanded to contain Environmental Arts, Growth Science, Consumer Studies, and Family and Community Services.<sup>12</sup> The College changed again in 2001, becoming the College of Human Services and Health Professions,<sup>13</sup> and it is now the College of Human Ecology.

Many schools and universities with home economics departments experienced similar changes over the years. For example, in 1965, a committee at Cornell formed to find the best way to “modernize” its College of Home Economics. Its members decided that the name was

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Syracuse University, “History of the College of Home Economics/College for Human Development,” *Collections and Personal Papers, Syracuse University Archives*, [http://archives.syr.edu/collections/human\\_dev/history.html](http://archives.syr.edu/collections/human_dev/history.html) (accessed April 11, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Syracuse University, “Schools and Colleges Collections,” *Collections and Personal Papers, Syracuse University Archives*, <http://archives.syr.edu/collections/schools.html> (accessed April 11, 2010).

outdated and pinned to gender stereotypes. They also decided to change the name to the College of Human Ecology, choosing also to expand the types of majors it held. According to Cornell's historians, this name, "while somewhat ambiguous, accurately reflected the academic and theoretical orientation of the College and its diverse concerns with problems of human welfare."<sup>14</sup> The changes in Cornell and Syracuse's ideologies about teaching home economics reflected a broader shift in this country. The field is somewhat less constrained by gender roles, and, as Sylvia points out, it is now commonplace to see men in a grocery store, and the contemporary focus is on nutrition and hygiene rather than cooking and sewing.<sup>15</sup>

Following her graduation from Syracuse in 1940, Sylvia embarked on a journey that would change her life forever. She had heard about a position with the Home Service Department of the Providence Gas Company and, despite not knowing where Providence was, she got on a train and went for an interview. She got the job. Several years before America became a truly mobile nation (with an estimated 15.3 million civilians relocating during the World War II era), Sylvia not only challenged the dependent role attributed to women, but also the common practice of remaining in or close to one's hometown.<sup>16</sup> She set off on her own to live and work about four hours from her family in unfamiliar Rhode Island. Except for a cousin who worked in New Bedford, Massachusetts, none of Sylvia's relatives lived in New England. To make her parents comfortable with her decision to live on her own, she moved into the Y, the Young Women's Christian Association, a "safe place."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, "YWCA's are significant in American history for their role in providing crucial support services to working women," as they

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<sup>14</sup> Cornell University, "Why the Change to Human Ecology?," *What Was Home Economics?*, <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/homeEc/cases/namechange.html> (accessed April 25, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> University of Michigan, "A Brief History of How Home Economics Came to Be," *Home Economics*, [http://sitemaker.umich.edu/356.swidler/.history\\_](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/356.swidler/.history_) (accessed April 25, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Judy Barrett Litoff, "Home Front Americans at War: 1941-1945," *Daily Lives of Civilians in Wartime Modern America* eds. David S. Heidler and Jeanne A. Heidler (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 74-75.

<sup>17</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn Denhoff, interview by authors, Providence, RI, April 17, 2010.

“eased the transition of women from rural areas to the cities, from home to the world of work, and from domestic pursuits to careers in offices and factories.”<sup>18</sup> A social girl, she was never lonely, and made friends with “a lot” of men and women and went on “a lot of dates.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Sylvia, the primary goal of the Providence Gas Company’s Home Service Department was “to promote the use of gas.”<sup>20</sup> In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “more convenient” electric stoves began to replace the traditional gas stoves, so Sylvia’s job was essential to retaining customers.<sup>21</sup> To encourage the use of gas appliances, she taught cooking to brides and did food demonstrations on gas stoves in a show room at the Providence Gas Company. Nicknamed the “Girl in White” because of the white apron she always wore, Sylvia, herself, learned to cook better in the process. Although she had picked up on some of her mother’s cooking methods and had studied theoretical cooking at Syracuse, it was at Providence Gas Company that Sylvia gained practical experience, learning how to read and write recipes. In addition, she made home calls and would show customers who recently bought gas stoves (or refrigerators) how to use them and care for them properly, always leaving behind recipes for them to try. To make such visits, she drove the company car as she had gotten her driver’s license when she was seventeen years old. She recalls how people would call her for food and cooking advice, as well as more recipes, and, although she “didn’t know all the answers,” she says, “I knew where to find the answers ... It was a very variable job and a very fun job!”<sup>22</sup> Her cooking course focused on “medium cost recipes” with attention given to the “time and

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<sup>18</sup> Antoinette J. Lee, “Supporting Working Women: YWCA Buildings in the National Register of Historic Places,” *OAH Magazine of History* 12 (Fall 1997): 1-2, <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/women/lee.htm> (accessed April 21, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> SBD Interview, April 2010.

<sup>20</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

<sup>21</sup> The People History, “The Changes to Home Appliances Over the Last 50 Years,” *Home Appliances*, <http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/appliances.html> (accessed April 12, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

temperature charts” available for the gas ranges.<sup>23</sup> She shared recipes for elaborate meals including roast turkey, sausage stuffing, roast chicken, crown roast of pork, raw cranberry relish, pumpkin chiffon pie, cranberry ice cream, squash pie, mincemeat and cranberry tarts, salads, shortcakes, scones, rolls, doughnuts, breads, and muffins. The main ingredients she used in these recipes would not be available in just a few years time, when rationing became a prominent feature during the Second World War.<sup>24</sup>

When the war came to the United States in December 1941, new recipes for traditional dishes had to be found. The Providence Gas Company was fortunate, according to Sylvia, because “a lot of people wanted recipes for something to bake to send the soldiers overseas and we had a recipe called Miss Massey’s fruit cake,” which contained a lot of raisins and, if baked thoroughly, could last weeks in the hold of a ship and not get moldy.<sup>25</sup> Such a recipe was essential to building the morale of the men overseas. As women recognized the importance of mail to keep their boys’ spirits high, “...mothers and sisters, fiancés and wives all wanted to send something from home.”<sup>26</sup>

In the summer of 1942, Sylvia returned home to Passaic, New Jersey to live with her parents. Before the United States entered World War II, Sylvia often took the train home from Providence to visit her family. With the coming of war, there was talk of cutting train services, and Sylvia did not want to be “stranded” from her parents and siblings, including her brother, who was living at home at the time, despite having enlisted in the Army.<sup>27</sup> Sylvia chuckles as

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<sup>23</sup> Home Service Department, “Medium Cost Recipes: Course II: Lesson I,” *Providence Gas Company*, Papers of Sylvia Brooklyn Denhoff.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> SBD interview, March 2010

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

she explains how, ironically, he had broken his ankle while playing football and, consequently, never engaged in combat.

While working at the Providence Gas Company, Sylvia began dating Dr. Eric Denhoff, who “proposed” to her on their third date.<sup>28</sup> Sylvia initially rejected his proposal, but as the war wore on, their relationship deepened. In fact, they began a prototypical “courtship by mail” when Eric, who served in the Army as a medical doctor, was assigned to the Pacific Theater of War in January 1942.

Back home in Passaic, Sylvia got a job at an airplane factory in nearby Clifton. Referred to by Sylvia as “Wright Aeronautical,” the facility was owned by Curtiss-Wright Corporation, which was formed with the merger of Wright Aeronautical Company and Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company on July 5, 1929.<sup>29</sup> During World War II, Curtiss-Wright led “the world in the production of aircraft engines, producing 142,840 engines for 13,789 P-40 Warhawk airplanes, with a complement of 146,468 propellers, while employing more than 43,000 employees.”<sup>30</sup> Although her role at the factory was just as essential to the production process, Sylvia was no “Rosie the Riveter.” Her role at the airplane factory was to manage the distribution of food to the employees. The factory workers did not have time to go out for a meal, and many did not bring lunches, so Sylvia had to make sure that there were plenty of sandwiches and coffee, and that they were prepared properly. While at Wright Aeronautical, she had six trucks and twelve women under her command, but her “best job of all” was yet to come.<sup>31</sup>

While having her teeth cleaned in 1943, Sylvia was chatting with her dentist about her work and interest in home economics. He suggested, “Why don’t you try to get a job at *PM*?” to

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Curtiss-Wright Flow Control Company, “Curtiss-Wright Timeline,” *Our History*, [http://www.cwfc.com/About\\_Us/spokes/history2.htm](http://www.cwfc.com/About_Us/spokes/history2.htm) (accessed April 12, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> SBD interview, March 2010

which Sylvia replied, “What’s *PM*?”<sup>32</sup> Her dentist told her to look in the office waiting room, where she found several copies of the left-wing newspaper and wrote down the address of the main office, writing them a letter when she got home. She remarks, “it was not an official application... all I said was ‘Do you need a home economist on your staff?’”<sup>33</sup> She was immediately asked to come in for an interview. One of the newspaper staff girls had joined the Red Cross and was leaving for Europe and they had an opening. While she admits the job application process was “very unorthodox,” Sylvia, reflecting on her time at *PM*, calls it “a fantastic job,” exclaiming, “I loved it.”<sup>34</sup> She was happy to leave Wright Aeronautical for this “better opportunity.”<sup>35</sup>

*PM* was a critically important newspaper during World War II. Founded by Ralph Ingersoll, it was circulated throughout New York City from 1940-1948. *PM* was an ideologically driven publication, the manifestation of its founder’s ideas about excellence in journalism and dedication to liberalism. Ralph Ingersoll was dissatisfied with the state of journalism in New York, and wanted to create an alternative news source. At the time, the majority of the city’s nine major English language papers were “thin in news, repetitive in advertising, and astonishingly ugly to read.”<sup>36</sup> In addition, these papers were largely conservative; they were anti-labor, critical of President Franklin Roosevelt, and against U.S. entry into the war. *PM* was radical in many ways, and not only because of its politics. Ingersoll wanted to create a full-color, left-leaning paper that was entirely free of advertisements in order to ensure the quality of the writing and reporting. Furthermore, he wanted his journalists to have free reign in choosing their subject matter and writing style.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> SBD interview, April 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Milkman, *PM: A New Deal in Journalism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 24.

Even though Sylvia did not know about the politics of *PM* when she first worked there, she later learned all about it. She explains, “It was a very liberal paper, and they didn’t take any advertising, because they didn’t want to be beholden to any advertisers, and so they could develop their own policies. And a lot of people thought it was a communist paper, but it was a liberal paper.”<sup>37</sup> Sylvia admits that she cared more about her work with food than she did about the politics, saying, “Well I’ll be very honest with you, I didn’t pay much attention to the politics - I paid more attention to the food page.”<sup>38</sup>

The paper was a great place to work, and she notes, “It was very stimulating, nothing boring about it. I loved it.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, the location was perfect for Sylvia because she could commute by either train or bus from her home in Passaic. There were many prominent intellectuals and artists that were involved with *PM*. And, even though Sylvia never met *PM* founder Ralph Ingersoll, photographer Margaret Bourke-White, or political cartoonist Theodore Seuss Geisel, she did know columnists Max Lerner and I.F. Stone.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, daily life and the policies of the newspaper were inextricably linked. One of the ways in which this manifested itself was through the Newspaper Guild:

Led by columnist Heywood Broun, the American Newspaper Guild began in 1933. Dissatisfaction with their pay was the main reason that editorial workers, traditionally independent, came together. Often called a union of individuals, the Guild affiliated with the American Federation of Labor [AFL] in 1936 and the Congress of Industrial Unions [CIO] in 1937.<sup>41</sup>

Ingersoll was a strong proponent of unions, and this was reflected by the policies of *PM*. Paul Milkman writes, “At this newspaper one could not only be a member of a union, but one could

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<sup>37</sup> SBD interview, March 2010

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Newspaper Guild, “Our History,” *The Newspaper Guild: Communication Workers of America*, <http://www.newsguild.org/index.php?ID=903> (accessed April 11, 2010).

and should champion unionism.”<sup>42</sup> In his 1940 “Confidential Memorandum to the Staff of *PM*,” Ingersoll wrote, “*PM* believes in the institution of the trade union,” a belief which made for a generous Newspaper Guild contract which covered the entire editorial staff, including copyboys.<sup>43</sup> *PM*’s staff was higher-paid with better benefit packages than the staff at any of New York’s other newspapers, and it was the first newspaper to offer severance pay to employees who resigned.<sup>44</sup> Reflecting on becoming a member of the union, Sylvia says, “...it was a closed shop, you had to join the newspaper guild, but I didn’t mind that. I loved the job, I loved it.”<sup>45</sup>

At Syracuse, Sylvia had learned how to write magazine articles about home economics, and she put that knowledge to good use while employed at *PM*. At its founding, the newspaper “was the lone pioneer” when it came to “[reporting] on good values available in food and clothing... regularly [treating] these ‘women’s issues’ as the basic needs of all citizens.”<sup>46</sup> In preparation for the war, the federal Committee on Food Habits would “[reinforce] the notion of women as gatekeepers of family food consumption” and determined through extensive research that “the most effective way to alter Americans’ food habits was to work through women,”<sup>47</sup>

Through the Wartime Homemaker, who was invariably portrayed as young, attractive, white, clean, well-dressed, and going about her work solemnly though with good cheer, the government told women their kitchens were battlefields in two senses: women should deploy their resources by obeying government orders to conserve food and abide by rationing restrictions, and they should guard the family health by ensuring that their families receive satisfying and nutritious foods.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Milkman, *PM*, 47-48.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Milkman, *PM*, 46.

<sup>47</sup> Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 24.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 31.



Thus, articles such as Sylvia's would become particularly significant during World War II, as "recipes, shopping lists, and costs were provided" for families with different income levels and proved especially helpful during the strictest days of rationing.<sup>49</sup>

Following the attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor, "nationwide rationing began almost immediately."<sup>50</sup> Food rationing began in May 1942.<sup>51</sup> It was intended to ensure the fair distribution of scarce products such as "butter, sugar, meat, canned fruits and vegetables, cooking oil, tea, coffee, dried beans, ketchup, and baby food," by establishing price ceilings and a strict point system based on the number of persons in a family, not wealth.<sup>52</sup> Uniform coupon rationing for items such as sugar, "provided equal shares of a single commodity to all consumers," while point rationing, "provided equivalent shares of commodities by coupons issued for points which could be spent for any combination of items in the group (processed foods, meats, fats, cheese)."<sup>53</sup> To buy rationed goods, one needed the necessary money, of course, but the correct coupons and/or points were also needed. To further regulate (and complicate) the point system, the Office of Price Administration (OPA) created red-point stamps and blue-point stamps for different uses. "Red points were for meat, butter, cheese, sugar, and oils. Blue points were for canned foods."<sup>54</sup> In 1944, yet another complication was added as blue and red ration *tokens* were introduced to allow shop owners to give consumers change for food purchased with ration stamps.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Sylvia had quite the job ahead of her. During her

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<sup>49</sup> Milkman, *PM*, 46.

<sup>50</sup> "Introductory Information about Rationing," *World War II Rationing*, <http://www.ameshistoricalsociety.org/exhibits/events/rationing.htm> (accessed March 4, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Bright Hub, "The Home Front: Learning About World War II Food Rationing," *World War II Food Rationing on the Home Front: History Lesson Idea*, <http://www.brighthub.com/education/k-12/articles/33634.aspx> (accessed March 4, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> "Introductory Information about Rationing."

<sup>54</sup> Bright Hub, "The Home Front: Learning About World War II Food Rationing."

<sup>55</sup> "Introductory Information about Rationing."

employment at *PM*, she would have to monitor OPA policies, market activity, and consumer preferences, maintaining a balance among all of them.

Through her use of substitutes for traditional foods, observance of price ceilings, and strict attention to nutrition, convenience, and taste, Sylvia created menus that met the physical and psychological needs of the wartime nation. In her first article, Sylvia wrote, “Escarole, a better buy than lettuce nutritionally and economically, is reasonable and plentiful. The fish supply is good, and offers variety as well as money-saving value.”<sup>56</sup> This optimistic tone was apparent in most of her articles, as she proved that rationing did not have to be devastating to one’s taste buds, but instead a chance to try something new. For example, she wrote, “You can save points as well as money and never even miss butter for cooking or table use, if you buy margarine.”<sup>57</sup> She also suggested for her readers to “use more parsley to add color and flavor to your menus,” explaining, “You can purchase it by the penny, thereby buying as much as you need.”<sup>58</sup> Meat substitutes were given particular attention, however, as beef was in especially short supply on the home front, and she emphasized that “dried peas, beans and lentils, low in point value, unrationed soft cheeses, fresh fish and eggs, all plentiful and moderately priced, can be used to good advantage in place of meat.”<sup>59</sup> In addition, “One way to save your [red] ration points is to serve fresh fish at least twice a week. High in protein (to build and repair body tissue), it is an excellent meat substitute.”<sup>60</sup> In her review of the classic cookbook, *The Joy of Cooking, New, Enlarged Edition*, released in 1943 by Irma S. Rombauer, Sylvia noted, “There is

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<sup>56</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Buys in the Markets: Escarole, Celery Low; Root Vegetables Cheap,” *PM*, February 2, 1943, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Buys in the Markets: Root Vegetables Low; Fruit Scarce,” *PM*, October 5, 1943, 18.

<sup>58</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Buys in the Markets: Flounder Moderate; Root Vegetables Low,” *PM*, February 17, 1943, 23.

<sup>59</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Buys in the Markets: Green Beans Cheaper,” *PM*, April 27, 1943, 20.

<sup>60</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Meals for Friday: Fish Pie in Crumb Crust Saves Brown Ration Points,” *PM*, November 4, 1943, 16.

a good selection of practical low-cost recipes and foreign dishes. Chapters on sugar savers, meat stretchers and meat substitutes help to meet wartime needs.”<sup>61</sup>

Unfortunately, Sylvia did not have a test kitchen at *PM*, so she had to evaluate the recipes sent to her by companies (such as those that sold bananas, oranges, and jello) before publishing them in *PM*.<sup>62</sup> She recalls, “We tried to change them a little without having to test them in a kitchen. Like you change the amount of salt, or, you, instead of putting vanilla in something, you put almond flavoring.”<sup>63</sup> Although she would only occasionally test the recipes in her mother’s kitchen, Sylvia never got any complaints about the recipes she included in her articles.

Aware that work and volunteering took up women’s limited time to prepare meals, Sylvia also paid attention to meal preparation time. In her July 23, 1943 article “Meal For the Week-End,” she wrote:

The menus for the week end, requiring little time and energy in the kitchen, provide good nutrition. A hearty lunch salad, grilled sandwiches, macaroni and cheese, and roast pork, the main courses for Saturday and Sunday, can be quickly prepared. The pork requires long cooking, but little attention. A 5 lb. loin of pork, providing ample savings for two meals, is a good choice for a family of four.<sup>64</sup>

She also reviewed restaurants for those who wanted to eat outside of the home. Sylvia recalls, “I would only recommend it if you could get a good meal for \$1.50, and the service was nice and the food was good. And, after I’d had the meal, I’d pay for it, and then I’d ask to see the kitchen. And, if the kitchen was clean, then they got recommended.”<sup>65</sup> She never got “a free meal out of it, so that [she] could give [her] honest opinion.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “*PM*’s Cook-Book Guide: Recipes for All Occasions,” *PM*, July 13, 1943, 20.

<sup>62</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Meals for Week-end: Roast Pork: Salads, Grilled Sandwiches; Save You Time and Labor in the Kitchen,” *PM*, July 23, 1943, 20.

<sup>65</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Sylvia did not work for the Office of Price Administration (OPA), but she felt it was important to ensure that her readers understood the point system and how to best use it.<sup>67</sup> She often provided “point-saving tips” such as:

When you buy one pound of raisins or prunes you surrender 20 points, but if you buy two pounds, only 88 points are required. Whenever possible, buy these commodities in bulk to save points. Check your point values to find the greatest number of ounces that can be procured for the least number of points. For example, a quantity of prunes or raisins, weighing anywhere between 22 and 27 ounces requires exactly the same number of points- 32. Obviously, you save points buying 27 ounces rather than 22.<sup>68</sup>

As “the point values were periodically reevaluated,” she was sure to keep up with any adjustments made by the OPA.<sup>69</sup> One such adjustment was made for Christmas 1943, as, “With the new OPA regulation validating Spare Stamp No. 1 in Ration Book No. 4 for the purchase of pork products until Jan. 2, a family of four will have 20 extra points toward the purchase of a ham.”<sup>70</sup> Earlier that fall, in September 1943, she had warned, “With a threatened scarcity of butter and commercial jams and jellies for the Winter you can easily overcome the prospect of ‘bread without spread’ by putting up jellies now.”<sup>71</sup> Those who did would likely have had a pleasant Christmas dinner.

Sylvia’s first mention of a price ceiling appeared in her February 24, 1943 article when one had “been set on peas, tomatoes, cabbage, carrots, and green beans.”<sup>72</sup> She often reminded her readers that such policies were put into effect to ensure fairness in the market. Even though some wealthy individuals could afford to pay above the ceilings, to do so would be considered unpatriotic, because it would inhibit equal distribution throughout wartime America. In March

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<sup>67</sup> SBD interview, April 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Buys in the Markets: Plentiful Supply of Fruit, Vegetables,” *PM*, March 3, 1943, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 16.

<sup>70</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Meals for Weekend: Baked Ham for Christmas; Serve Holiday Quick Bread,” *PM*, December 24, 1943, 19.

<sup>71</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Food Conservation: Successful Jelly Making; Some Simple Precautions,” *PM*, September 22, 1943, 18.

<sup>72</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Buys in the Markets: Bananas Available,” *PM*, February 24, 1943, 23.

1944, she wrote, “Bananas are appearing spasmodically on fruit stands this week, many selling ‘way above ceiling price.’ No true patriot will pay more than 13¢ *a pound* for them, the top ceiling price set by the Office of Price Administration.”<sup>73</sup>

In addition to points and rationing, Sylvia put much emphasis on nutrition in her articles. “By World War II, Americans were moderately familiar with principles of nutrition, since home economists for several decades had emphasized the importance of vitamins and eating a variety of foods to attain optimum health.”<sup>74</sup> Yet, to ensure no one was left confused with her suggestions, Sylvia wrote as though each reader had no prior knowledge of the subject. For example, common in her articles were statements such as, “Remember that vegetables of dark green color are richer in Vitamin A than vegetables with light-bleached leaves. A daily intake of foods containing this vitamin is necessary for growth, resistance to infections, prevention of night blindness and for the normal functioning of glands.”<sup>75</sup>

Throughout the wartime years, Americans were encouraged to plant victory gardens, and “nearly 20 million gardens were grown, yielding about 40 percent of all vegetables produced in the United States.”<sup>76</sup> Interestingly enough, neither Sylvia, nor anyone she knew, ever had a victory garden. Therefore, she never accounted for homegrown vegetables in her *PM* articles.

Although Sylvia’s column was written for women, on at least two separate occasions, she received requests from men on what to write. Eric, her boyfriend, wrote to her, “How do you make spam palatable?” as he had eaten so much of it while in the Army that his taste buds were getting bored.<sup>77</sup> In response, Sylvia wrote a column entitled “10 Different Ways to Make Spam

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<sup>73</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Meals for Friday: Sliced Bananas for Dessert; Boycott If Above Ceiling,” *PM*, March 9, 1944, 19.

<sup>74</sup> Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 67.

<sup>75</sup> Sylvia Brooklyn, “Buys in the Markets: Leafy Greens, Rhubarb are Cheap,” *PM*, June 15, 1943, 19.

<sup>76</sup> Litoff, “Home Front Americans at War,” 74-75.

<sup>77</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

Palatable,” which included “mix it with pineapple, mix it with scrambled eggs.”<sup>78</sup> Poor Sylvia had forgotten, however, that the men overseas did not have such ingredients, so Eric had to endure his plain spam for the rest of his tour of duty. The second incident occurred when a man confronted Sylvia in person. Sylvia wrote several food columns during the war, including a weekly column, “Buys in the Markets,” and a daily column “Meals for [day of the week].” The daily column presented a meal suggestion that if followed exactly would cost the amount listed at the end of the column; if the reader followed Sylvia’s suggestions for the entire week, her total grocery bill would not exceed the target price, either \$10, \$14, or \$17.50 for a family of four.<sup>79</sup> One day, Sylvia chuckles, “A man came into the office and wanted to know, ‘Who writes the column on how to feed a family of four on \$10 a week?’ And, I said, ‘I do.’ He said, ‘Oh, my wife follows you religiously, would you please put steak on the menu?’”<sup>80</sup> Unfortunately, she could not afford it, unless he was willing to pay \$14 per week instead. This story demonstrates how influential Sylvia’s role was on women’s cooking practices during the war.

Sylvia loved her job writing about food for *PM* and she loved working in the city. She had an office and a desk with her own typewriter. Although she continued to live with her parents, she could take the train or the bus and became a very comfortable commuter. Some days she would call the markets to find out what was fresh, but on other days she would take the subway down to the Lower East Side to see what was available. Her frequent use of the city buses and subways made her an expert on New York City travel and directions. Thus, she was well prepared for her second job at *PM*.

In August 1944, the wartime paper shortage forced *PM* to eliminate the two pages that it had devoted to food. Sylvia was then assigned to the shopping page. She explains that, with her

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

second job, “I did a lot of travelling to different stores to see what was on sale and to see if the merchandise was of good quality.”<sup>81</sup> One assignment that she remembers involved researching the cost of repairing a typewriter, a machine that proved particularly useful when letter-writing: “I remember carrying an old typewriter with me and going to different typewriter repair shops. And, I’d compare prices on what needed to be done and how do you clean it.”<sup>82</sup>

Sylvia’s job kept her intimately involved with the war effort. Her work, advising people on how to get along with limited funds and available goods while maintaining a healthy diet, was a crucial part of the War Department’s mission to get Americans at home to do their part. Apart from this work, she also engaged in more typical wartime activities. During this time, Americans planted victory gardens, collected scrap metal, went to USO dances, rolled bandages for the Red Cross, gave blood, and bought war bonds.<sup>83</sup> Although she never had a victory garden, Sylvia taught a ten-week course in nutrition at the American Red Cross, volunteered to serve coffee at USO dances, gave blood, and bought war stamps and war bonds. She recalls, “There was a lot to keep you busy.”<sup>84</sup> In regards to donating blood, she says, “The first time I donated blood, my mother got very upset with me because I was very skinny, and she said that I should get the transfusion! So the next time I donated blood, I did it in New York!” She did not tell her mother because she “didn’t want to upset her.”<sup>85</sup> Sylvia was committed to helping the war effort, even at the possible expense of her own health. Her dedication to the war effort was common among Americans on the home front.

Sylvia’s dedication to her boyfriend, Eric, was similarly strong. In January 1942, Eric had been sent to New Caledonia and then to New Guinea, where he treated soldiers as well as

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Litoff, “Home Front Americans at War,” 74-75.

<sup>84</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

local children. He also learned about blood work and tropical diseases, which, Sylvia proudly explains, made him “a great diagnostician” when he returned home.<sup>86</sup>

Because their relationship was largely a “courtship by mail,” Sylvia and Eric’s primary method of maintaining and deepening their bond was through letters. Sylvia wrote every day, and she enjoyed it. She says, “I liked writing. I kept telling him what I was doing, and he couldn’t tell me everything that was going on, because they weren’t allowed to tell you where they were...but he used to write.”<sup>87</sup> She used V-mail because it was the fastest and most efficient way to communicate.<sup>88</sup> When asked whether or not she liked it, she declares, “Well, I had no choice!”<sup>89</sup> Eric was able to write back to her when he had time, but Sylvia was never sure when the letters were being shipped. Sometimes she would get large bundles of mail all at once. Even so, she received letters several times a week. Speaking about the impact of mail on her own morale, she says, “If you didn’t get a letter that day, it was depressing.”<sup>90</sup>

Eric’s first proposal did not come in a letter, however, Sylvia laughs, “He proposed to me on our third date! ... I used to tease him and say, ‘you know, you proposed to me on our third date!’ And he would say, ‘I did not, all I did was ask you ‘how’d you like to be married?’”<sup>91</sup> The official decision to get married was made through letters, though, and they were wed within two months of his return to the United States, on July 8, 1945.

Building and maintaining a relationship through letters was a special challenge, one understood by many women during this time. There was often a great deal of camaraderie among “war brides,” “war wives,” and women who had boyfriends and fiancés in the war.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> On the significance of V-mail, see Litoff, Judy Barrett and David C. Smith. “‘Will He Get My Letter?’ Popular Portrayals of Mail and Morale During World War II.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 23, no. 4 (1990).

<sup>89</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.



Sylvia felt this as well. At one point, Eric wrote to her and asked her to get in touch with Doris Fabricant, the wife of one of his best friends in the service. The two women became very close friends, and maintained their friendship after the war. Sylvia also had friends in Passaic, as well as in New York, including a young war wife who lost her husband in the Battle of the Bulge.<sup>92</sup>

When the war in Europe finally ended on May 7-8, Sylvia, like many Americans, was only “half-happy,” and was anxious for the rest of the war to end.<sup>93</sup> With the war in the Pacific, where Eric was stationed, still raging, she remained anxious and concerned.

About the dropping of the atomic bombs on August 6 and 9, 1945, she says, “I was very supportive, because we wanted the war to be over. ... It was unfortunate that so many innocent people had to die, but it was very important to bring the war to an end.”<sup>94</sup> According to Sylvia, this was a common sentiment among Americans in World War II. She was somewhat afraid of the power of the weapon, but she believed that it was absolutely necessary. “It was a very horrible, destructive thing, but I think at that time we were happy the war was over, and people could get back to normal lives. And if that’s what it took to get the war over... I think Harry Truman made a wise decision.” She recognizes that this viewpoint is perhaps less common today than it was at the time and says that it is not possible for people to understand what was going on then without having experienced it. She explains, “People who didn’t live in those days can’t see it that way, but if you were living then, you wanted that war to be over.”<sup>95</sup>

With Eric stationed in the Pacific, Sylvia had closely followed that theater of war, and in the spring of 1945, she had a feeling that Eric would be able to come home soon. Indeed, after forty months of duty in the South Pacific, during which he had only one week-long leave in

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

Australia, Eric arrived in New York City on May 30, 1945 and surprised Sylvia with a phone call. That same month, Sylvia left her job at *PM* and took the train to Providence, where Eric picked her up to bring her to his parents' house in Taunton, Massachusetts. They were married on July 8, 1945. There was barely time for a honeymoon, however, because three days later, Eric was sent to work at Harmon General Hospital in Longview, Texas. They would live in Texas until Eric was discharged one month after the official end of the war on August 15, 1945. Following his discharge, Sylvia and Eric moved back to Providence and lived in an apartment until 1951, when they bought their house on Morrison Street, where they lived until Eric passed away in 1982.

Like many American women, Sylvia left the workforce after the war to focus on raising her family. Her first child, Donald, was born in 1946, then came Joe in 1948, followed by Barbara in 1952. "I guess those were all baby boomers, all of them," Sylvia laughs when listing their birth years.<sup>96</sup> Reflecting on what her life was like after the war, Sylvia says, "I was happy to get back to a normal life... [I] got married, had three children, had a good marriage, and what was happening in the rest of the world didn't affect me anymore."<sup>97</sup> Although she chose the role of homemaker, Sylvia was very excited about the work First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was doing for American women. She exclaims, "Oh, I admired her a lot... I think she did a lot for women because she was active and she travelled and she spoke up. And I liked her a lot!"<sup>98</sup>

Sylvia recognizes that her role as a home economist was more important than ever during the war, despite the fact that cooking was historically a woman's job. As Sylvia explains, "In those days, women did the cooking and took care of the kids... A man wouldn't walk into the

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<sup>96</sup> SBD interview, April 2010.

<sup>97</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

<sup>98</sup> SBD interview, April 2010.

market.”<sup>99</sup> Agreeing that she became more independent and self-assured as a result of the war, Sylvia proclaims, “Experience helps you to grow. And ... to work and be self-sufficient is very helpful.”<sup>100</sup> Her values concerning family and motherhood remain the same today as they did prior to the war, but she is happy to see that men have become homemakers, themselves, and women more equal partners in recent decades.

After marrying Eric, Sylvia never worked for wages again. As her children grew, however, she became more involved in the Rhode Island community. In the early 1960s, Dr. Eric Denhoff and Dr. Maurice Laufer, the head of Bradley Hospital, founded the Governor Center School for children with learning disabilities and special education needs. Sylvia met Esther D’Orsey, the principal of the school, at a Christmas party and expressed interest in teaching cooking to the students, if only they had a kitchen to use. Esther enthusiastically replied, “There’s one in the basement. When would you like to start?”<sup>101</sup> For several years, Sylvia taught cooking to both female and male students at the Governor Center. A few years ago, Sylvia proudly shares, one of “the boys” she taught called and said, “Because of you, I love to cook... And, I’m a GOOD cook!”<sup>102</sup> Sylvia says that phone call “validated” her efforts.<sup>103</sup>

Sylvia also volunteered at the Meeting Street School (MSS), established in 1946 by her husband, Eric, and Margaret “Poggy” Langdon “to provide integrated educational, therapeutic, and developmental services to children with disabilities and developmental delays.”<sup>104</sup> She had been called by the principal of MSS to help Elaine Lieberman, a speech therapist, to teach a

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<sup>99</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Meeting Street, “Our History,” *Meeting Street: Where Every Child Thrives*, <http://www.meetingstreet.org/AboutMeetingStreet/OurHistory/tabid/152/Default.aspx> (accessed March 4, 2010).

“blond-haired boy” how to blow a ball across a table.<sup>105</sup> A few years later, she returned to MSS to teach sewing to mostly cerebral palsy students. Every student was given a special task based on his or her abilities. Unfortunately, over time the sewing machine broke, as did its replacement. Still dedicated to the school, today, at the age of 92, she volunteers every Tuesday morning to read to the students.

Although Eric did not want Sylvia to work following the war, he certainly did not force her to stay at home. Besides her volunteering activities, Sylvia travelled the world with her husband, sightseeing while he attended medical conferences. Her love of food and cooking only intensified with her travels, as she brought back cookbooks full of new and exotic recipes to try. A home economist still today, she often tries out new recipes (or tests those from decades ago) at home for her visitors and neighbors. A nutritionist at heart, she continues to read up on the latest studies and believes her astoundingly clear memory can be at least partly attributed to the wheat germ she puts in her cereal each morning.

In some ways, Sylvia’s experiences were like those of other United States women during World War II. While maintaining a courtship by mail, she actively participated in the home front war efforts, went to work, and made the best of her situation at the time, all while living in her childhood home. In other ways, however, her experience was unique. Her wartime job was not in a factory, but at a left-wing newspaper that challenged conventional reporting. The columns she wrote proved to be an integral part of the country’s efforts to conserve food and promote nutrition during the Second World War.

Sylvia does not see her World War II experience as having a significant role in the history of the nation. It was just what she did during those years. She does not feel that the war changed her life in any dramatic way as her plans before the war were to go to college, have a

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<sup>105</sup> SBD interview, March 2010.

career, and get married and raise a family. That is exactly what she did. While the specifics of her story may have been unusual, it followed the common trajectory for many women of Sylvia's generation. While Sylvia does acknowledge that working at *PM* gave her some valuable skills for later in life, namely self-confidence and independence, she does not credit World War II as shaping her future character.

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